2. General Design Guidelines

These design guidelines apply to improvement projects in the Houston Street area, including new buildings and alterations to existing structures. (Note that Chapter Three provides additional, supplemental guidelines for historic buildings.) It is important to note that, while emphasis is placed on respecting historic resources, change is anticipated in the area; it is not to be "frozen." However, alterations and new construction should respect the traditional design context. These guidelines are based on that policy.

The fundamental approach to design is that the Houston Street area should convey a sense of a time and place, which is expressed through its numerous historic and traditional buildings. This character should be maintained. When new building occurs, or an existing structure is altered, it should be in a manner that reinforces the basic character-defining features of the area. Such features include the way in which a building is located on its site, the manner in which it faces the street, its materials and the general alignment of architectural elements and details along a block. In a new building when these design variables are arranged in a way so as to be similar to those seen traditionally in the area, visual compatibility results. Even so, new design approaches can, and should, be accommodated when they respect these basic historic features that are valued by the community.

It is important to note that, while emphasis is placed on respecting historic resources, change is anticipated in the area; it is not to be "frozen." However, alterations and new construction should respect the traditional design context.

This chapter presents design guidelines for the following issues:

- Site plan
- Architectural character
- Mass, scale and form
- Exterior building materials
- Upper-story windows
- Entries
- Pedestrian interest
- Awnings and canopies
- Building lighting
- Mechanical equipment and service utilities

Locate the front building wall at the sidewalk line when feasible.

Site Plan

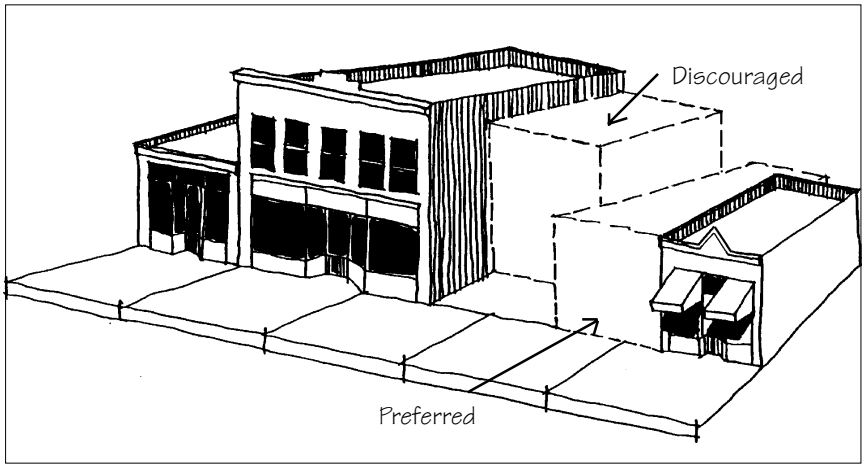
Most structures in the Houston Street historic area contribute to a strong "building wall" along the street because they align at the front lot line and are usually built out the full width of the parcel, to the side lot lines. Although some gaps do occur, these are exceptions. This site plan characteristics of building to the sidewalk edges should be preserved.

2.1 Maintain the alignment of buildings at the sidewalk edge.

- Locate the front building wall at the sidewalk line when feasible.

2.2 Orient the primary entrance of a building toward the street.

- A building should have a clearly defined primary entrance. For most commercial buildings, this should be a recessed entryway.
- A secondary public entrance to commercial spaces is also encouraged on a larger building.



Align the building front at the sidewalk edge.

Photo left, before: The street wall is broken with a vacant lot. Photo right, after: A new building maintains alignment at the sidewalk edge.

Architectural Character

While it is important that new buildings and alterations be compatible with the historic context, it is not necessary that they imitate older building styles. In fact, stylistically distinguishing new buildings from their older neighbors on Houston Street is preferred, when the overall design of the new infill reinforces traditional development patterns.

2.3 New interpretations of traditional building styles are encouraged.

- A new design that draws upon the fundamental similarities among older buildings in the area without copying them is preferred. This will allow it to be seen as a product of its own time and yet still compatible with its historic neighbors.
- The literal imitation of older historic styles is discouraged.
- In essence, the design of infill structures should be a balance of new and old in design.

This contemporary interpretation of a storefront includes a recessed entry and transom element.

New interpretations of traditional building styles are encouraged.

Traditional storefront features—such as a kickplate, display window, transom and recessed entry—are reinterpreted in this new storefront design.

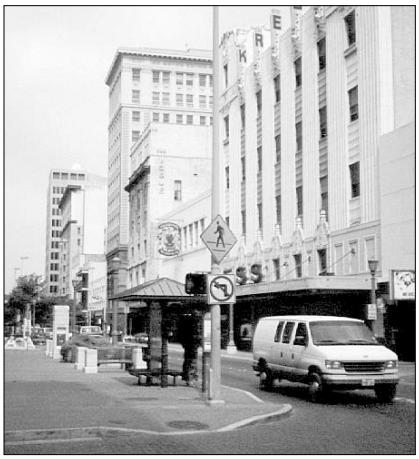
2.4 A new building should incorporate a base, a middle and a cap.

- Traditionally, buildings were composed of these three basic elements. Interpreting this tradition in new buildings will help reinforce the visual continuity of the area.

These three building models all incorporate the basic building blocks: (1) base, (2) middle and (3) cap.

Mass, Scale and Form

Building heights vary substantially on Houston Street and yet there is a strong sense of similarity in scale. This is in part because the first two stories of most buildings are similar in height. In addition, most buildings have features at the lower levels that are similar in scale. First floors, for example, are similar in height. Other lower floors are also defined by moldings that align along the block, which contributes to a perceived uniformity in height to pedestrians. A variety in building heights in new construction is, therefore, appropriate. However, the dominant scale of two to four stories should be maintained. This may be accomplished by literally constructing a building within this traditional height range; in other cases, design elements that reflect this traditional height may be incorporated into larger structures.



New construction should appear similar in mass and scale to structures found historically in the Houston Street area. See the early photo of how buildings aligned historically on page 11.

2.5 A new building should maintain the alignment of horizontal elements along the block.

- Window sills, moldings and midbelt cornices are among those elements that may align.

2.6 Floor-to-floor heights should appear to be similar to those seen historically.

- In particular, the windows in new construction should appear similar in height to those seen traditionally.

A new building should maintain the alignment of horizontal elements along the block. Window sills, moldings and midbelt cornices are among those elements that may be seen to align.

Consider dividing larger buildings into modules as this one is, to reflect the traditional building widths seen in the area.

2.7 Consider dividing a larger building into "modules" that are similar in scale to buildings seen historically.

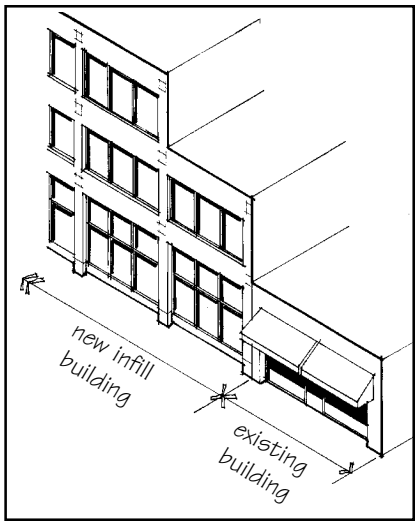
- If a larger building is divided into "modules," these should be expressed three-dimensionally throughout the entire building.
- When considering a tall structure, the alignment of building elements is particularly important. Although a new building may tower above the surrounding buildings, the first several stories should visually relate to the surrounding historic context.

This single infill building is divided into four smaller building modules that reflect the traditional building widths of its context. Upper floors step back from the front, thus maintaining the traditional two-story scale of the street.

A part of this contemporary infill building (above) is a parking structure which is set back from the front and sides of a "retail wrap." The openings in the parking section of the development also have window proportions similar to those seen historically.

2.8 Maintain the established building scale.

- Develop a primary facade that is in scale and aligns with surrounding historic buildings.
- If a building must be taller than those found traditionally on Houston Street, consider stepping upper stories back from the main facade, and design the lower levels to express the alignment of elements seen traditionally in the block.
- Also consider stepping the mass of a tall building down to a lower height as it approaches surrounding historic buildings.



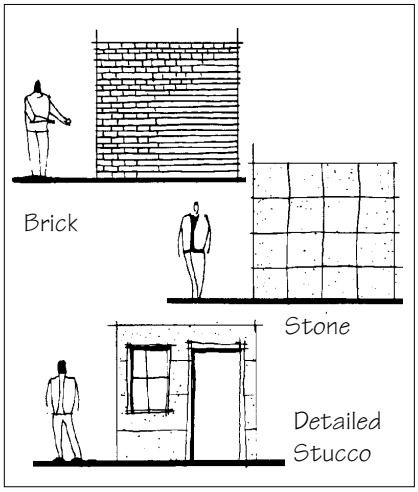
If a structure should be markedly taller than adjacent buildings, step down the height to establish a transition in scale.

Develop a primary facade that is in scale and aligns with surrounding historic buildings.

In this context, a new high-rise building on the right includes a two-story element that aligns with older structures to the left. A central entry is clearly identified. The taller portion of the building is set behind the lower element. This maintains the traditional scale of the street.

Materials should appear similar to those used historically, primarily stone or brick.

Stucco that is detailed to convey a sense of scale and provide visual interest is an appropriate material treatment.



Use building materials that are similar in their dimensions and that can be repeated as traditional modules. This will help to convey a human scale.

Exterior Building Materials

Traditionally, a limited palette of building materials was used on Houston Street—primarily brick, stone and terra cotta. This same selection of materials should continue to be predominant. New materials also may be considered, however, when they relate to those used historically in scale, texture, matte finish and detailing. They should help to convey a human scale as well.

2.9 Materials should appear similar to those used historically.

- Masonry was the traditional material and is preferred for new construction. This includes stone and brick.
- Wood and metal were used for window, door and storefront surrounds and should be continued in new construction.
- New materials also may be considered. If used, they should appear similar in character to those used historically. For example, stucco, cast stone and concrete should be detailed to provide a human scale.
- New materials also should have a demonstrated durability in the San Antonio climate.
- Large expanses of featureless materials are inappropriate.

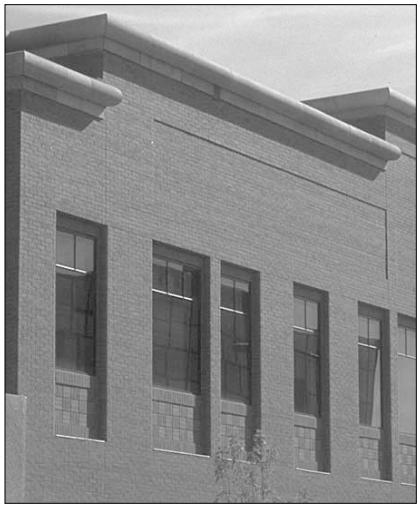
2.10 A simple material finish is encouraged for a large expanse of wall plane.

- A matte, or non-reflective, finish is preferred. Polished stone and mirrored glass, for example, should be avoided as primary materials over large surfaces.

These cast concrete elements convey the scale of traditional masonry facade components, which reinforces the traditional scale of buildings on this street.

Upper-Story Windows

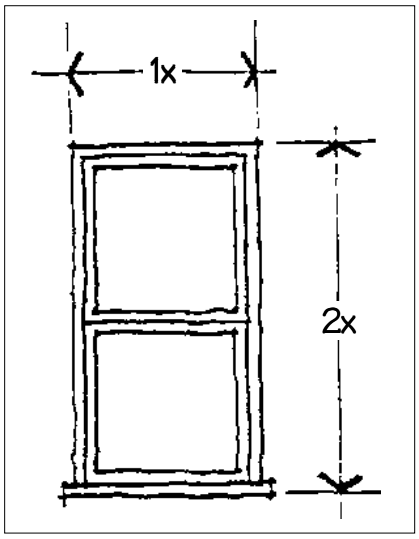
A pattern exists along the street with the repetition of evenly spaced, similarly-sized, upper-story windows in many buildings on Houston Street. This also gives a building a sense of human scale—even for high-rise towers. The alignment and similar scale of these upper story windows are parts features that should be continued.



Upper-story windows with vertical emphasis are encouraged.

2.11 Upper-story windows with vertical emphasis are encouraged.

- A typical upper-story window is twice as tall as it is wide. These proportions are within a limited range; therefore, upper story windows in new construction should relate to the window proportions seen historically.



Typically, upper-story windows are twice as tall as they are wide. This tradition should be continued. This may be expressed in a variety of ways. See the example to the left.

2.12 Windows should align with others in a block.

- Windows, lintels and trim elements should align with those on adjacent historic buildings.

Masonry was the traditional material and is preferred for new construction. This includes stone and brick.

Simplified interpretations of vernacular commercial storefronts are also appropriate.

Entries

The repetition of recessed building entries that occur along the street in the Houston Street historic area provide a rhythm of shadows along the street, that helps establish a sense of scale and invites pedestrians to enter the buildings. This trend should be continued in new construction.

2.13 Building entrances should appear similar to those used historically.

- Clearly define the primary entrance to a building with a canopy or other architectural feature.
- A contemporary interpretation of a traditional building entry, which is similar in scale and overall character to those seen historically, is encouraged.

2.14 Locate the primary building entrance to face the street.

- The building entrance should be recessed.
- A primary building entrance also should be at or near street level. A sunken terrace entrance is not appropriate as the primary access from the street.
- Likewise, constructing a stair in the public sidewalk on Houston Street that leads down to a basement level is also inappropriate.

Clearly define the primary entrance facing the street.

Pedestrian Interest

The Houston Street area should continue to develop as a pedestrian-oriented environment. Streets, sidewalks and pathways should encourage walking, sitting and other outdoor activities; buildings also should be visually interesting and invite exploration by pedestrians. Existing pedestrian routes should be enhanced.

When providing a storefront at the street level is not feasible, consider using display cases that illustrate goods and services available inside or nearby.

2.15 A building should express human scale through materials and forms that were seen traditionally.

- This is important because buildings are experienced at close proximity by the pedestrian.

2.16 Develop the ground floor level of a building to encourage pedestrian activity.

- Provide at least one of the following elements along primary pedestrian ways:
  - A storefront
  - Display cases
  - Public art
  - Landscaping
- Include traditional elements such as display windows, kickplates and transoms on commercial storefronts.
- Avoid a blank wall or vacant lot appearance.

2.17 Maintain clear, continuous walkway along the front of a building.

- Locate street furniture, outdoor tables and other outdoor accessories so that they will not block the pedestrian route.
- Railings and other permanent barriers should not be used in the public sidewalk.

Include traditional elements such as display windows, kickplates and transoms on commercial storefronts.

Canopies may be used to define entries.

Traditionally, awnings and especially canopies were noteworthy features of the Houston Street historic area and their continued use is encouraged. Although, enclosing the floor above the canopy is inappropriate, as seen in this photo.

Awnings and Canopies

The tradition of sheltering the sidewalk with awnings and canopies is well-established on Houston Street. Early photographs demonstrate that some of the first commercial buildings offered shade from the hot summer sun and shelter from rain storms with wooden canopies over the "sidewalk" area. These first canopies were simple in detail, reflecting the character of the buildings to which they were attached. Some had a shed form while others were flat; most of the early canopies were as wide as the sidewalk area and were supported on posts along their outer edges. Later, as more decorative architectural styles of buildings emerged, the detailing of the canopies also became more refined and typically included stylistic references to the parent building. Also, they no longer were supported on posts but hung from buildings on poles, chains or cables or were supported by wall-mounted brackets.

Awnings were simple, and fit into the building opening which they were covering. Some were operable (i.e., could be raised and lowered), while others were on a rigid frame. Awnings were generally on just first floors and some buildings had them on upper stories as well.

Canopies and awnings are noteworthy features of Houston Street and have a strong history of use. Their inclusion in the design of new construction is strongly encouraged.

2.18 The use of canopies and awnings is encouraged.

- They should be integrated into the design of the new building.
- They can incorporate new, compatible, contemporary designs.
- They should respect historical placement patterns (e.g., align with the edge of the sidewalk, follow the length of the building or window, contain accent features to show the building's entrance).

2.19 A fixed metal canopy is appropriate for many building styles.

- Appropriate supporting mechanisms are wall-mounted brackets, chains and posts.

2.20 A fabric awning may also be considered.

- Use colors that are compatible with the overall color scheme of the facade. Solid colors or simple, muted-stripe patterns are appropriate.
- The awning should fit the opening of the building.
- Simple shed shapes are appropriate for rectangular openings.
- Odd shapes, bullnose awnings and bubble awnings are inappropriate on most structures.
- Internal illumination in an awning is inappropriate.

2.21 On a historic building, mount an awning or canopy to accentuate character-defining features of window openings.

- It should be mounted to highlight moldings that may be found above the storefront and should match the shape of the opening.

A fixed metal canopy is appropriate for many building styles.

2.22 Incorporating lighting into the design of a canopy is encouraged.

- Lights can increase the safety of the street by illuminating the pedestrian walkway.
- Lights can provide interest along the street and add sparkle to the downtown.
- Lighting should complement the canopy and should not be a primary design feature.

2.23 Incorporating lighting into the design of an awning should be used with care.

- Recessed can lighting under an awning to provide lighting to the sidewalk is acceptable.
- Lighting fixtures that shine through an awning and make it “glow” are not appropriate.

A canopy should be integrated into the design of the new building.

Use lighting to accent building entrances.

Building Lighting

The character and level of lighting that is used on a building is a special concern. Traditionally, these exterior lights were simple in character and were used to highlight signs, entrances and first floor details. Most fixtures had incandescent lamps that cast a color similar to daylight, were relatively low in intensity, and were shielded with simple shade devices. This overall effect of modest, focused building lighting should be continued.

2.24 Use lighting for the following:

- To accent architectural details.
- To accent building entrances.
- To accent signs.
- To illuminate sidewalks.

2.25 Minimize the visual impacts of site and architectural lighting.

- All exterior light sources should have a low level of luminescence.
- White lights, such as incandescent, that cast a color similar to daylight are preferred.
- Do not wash an entire building facade in light.
- Lighting fixtures should be appropriate to the building and its surroundings in terms of style, scale and intensity of illumination.

2.26 Prevent glare by using shielded and focused light sources.

- Provide shielded and focused light sources that direct light downward.
- Unshielded, high intensity light sources and those that direct light upward should not be permitted.
- Shield lighting associated with service areas, parking lots and parking structures.

Mechanical Equipment and Service Utilities

Utility service boxes, telecommunication devices, cables and conduits are among the variety of equipment that may be attached to a building that can affect the character of the area. Trash and recycling storage areas also are concerns. Mechanical equipment and service areas should be located to the rear of a building or on a secondary street side.

2.27 Minimize the visual impact of mechanical equipment on the public way.

- Screen equipment from view.
- Do not locate window air conditioning units on the building's primary facade.
- Use low-profile mechanical units on rooftops that are not visible from public ways.
- Locate a satellite dish out of public view to the extent feasible and in compliance with other regulations.

2.28 Minimize the visual impacts of utility connections and service boxes.

- Locate them on secondary walls when feasible.

2.29 Locate standpipes and other service equipment such that they will not damage historic facade materials.

- Cutting channels into historic facade materials damages the historic building fabric and is inappropriate.
- Avoid locating such equipment on the front facade.

2.30 Locate trash storage and service areas at the rear of the building.

- Dumpsters should be screened from view.
- These areas shall be accessed from the alley side, new curb cuts are not allowed on Houston Street.